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TRUTH IN PACKAGING -- EVEN IN RELIGION

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Two institutions working under the title of the Pew Foundation just issued (April 25) a trussed-up rehash of old data under pretense of telling the world something “new” about religion among U.S. Latinos and Latinas.

It is certainly useful for such an important institution as Pew to promote the general findings in this increasingly important field of religious research. In fact, I might be flattered that the authors of this study have imitated so many of the innovations provided in the 2003 PARAL Study which I had the honor to direct.

However, just as when you’re buying a used car, you have to look under the hood to see what the motor is like, some notes of caution are required.

First, the report comes with the apparent intention — some would say the “obsession” — to make all religion among Latinos and Latinas into a celebration of Pentecostalism. Unable in previous Pew surveys to “prove” that most Latinos and Latinas were leaving Catholicism to become Protestant Pentecostals, the report now tells us that Catholic Charismatics should be considered Pentecostals.

Readers are not supposed to notice that such lumping together is false packaging: Catholic Charismatics are in full union with the church and are not people with one foot out the door.

Second, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal is neither “new” nor a “change.” As indicated in the award-winning “Recognizing the Latino Religious Resurgence,” co-authored with my spouse, Ana María Díaz-Stevens of Union Theological Seminary, the Cursillo Movement of the 1950s was the first such renewal effort based on Hispanic culture and is now closely linked to Catholics who use Charismatic style worship.

Sadly, the Pew survey’s disconnection from scholarly research in the field falsely labels 50-year-old tendencies as “new” and misleads the public egregiously.

Third, the survey asks pointed questions only about Catholicism instead of honest questions about all religions. Do we really need a survey to tell us that Catholics will gravitate to a Mass that is “lively” and away from one that is “dull”?

However, even the dullest Catholic Mass has more “life” than many a Presbyterian, Quaker, or Unitarian service. To ask only questions promoting a favorable answer about the Evangelical tendencies produces bias. For balance, there should have been questions about how many people find such Pentecostal church music “too loud” or “too worldly.” After all, there are more people who are not Evangelicals than there are converts away from Catholicism — a fact hidden by asking so many questions that encourage criticism of Catholicism alone.

Fourth, in an effort to make as many Latinos and Latinas “Evangelical” as possible, the study ignored the important finding of the PARAL Study that for Spanish-speakers “*evangélico*” is the ordinary word for the English “Protestant.”

As the distinguished professor Samuel Silva Gotay has indicated in his three-volume study of Puerto Rican religion, “*evangélico*” is used by Spanish-speaking Main Line Protestants. In other words, just because a Latino says he is “*evangélico*,” it is not correct to conclude that he is part of Pat Robertson’s Evangelical minions.

There are technical errors in this report, too. Like the small print on a medicine bottle, these details are important. For instance, the survey advertises itself as “large” with over 4,000 respondents and with a +/-2 margin of error. But in fact, many questions were posed to very small groups of people and the margin of error runs as high as +/-8 percent. A survey is not very good if 25 percent is statistically read as “maybe 17 percent and maybe 33 percent.” Once a week and twice a week are significantly different, as anybody getting a paycheck can tell you.

Perhaps most telling, the authors used the old-fashioned formula of giving respondents a pre-defined list of religions to choose from instead of just asking: “What is your religion, if any?”

The ARIS-PARAL report of 2003, based on the earlier monumental American Religious Identification Survey by Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keyser, proved beyond a doubt that the phrase, “. . .if any” significantly affects whether or not people will identify with “no religion.”

The reporting by Pew of what percentage of Latinos and Latinas are Catholic or Protestant is skewed because their question is now outmoded.

Yes, the Pew report is correct in calling attention to the impact on U.S. Catholicism from the growing proportion of Latinos and Latinas. And, yes, our musical cultures, like our political preferences, distinguish us from many other groups. But then, we knew all that years ago.

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